

The effects of international mobility on teachers' power of curriculum agency

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Abstract

Across the world, countries have engaged in different iterations of curriculum change, and one of the common denominators of reform is the proposal of more agency for teachers around curriculum making. This is not an easy task for teachers. The purpose of this paper **is to contribute to the discussion about the effects that international ERASMUS+ mobilities have had on the power of curricular agency of teachers from two European countries.** This work is based on an empirical investigation of a qualitative nature which collected the testimonies of four school headmasters, a deputy principal and eleven teachers from Ireland and Portugal, teaching different curriculum matters, who were involved in the ERASMUS+ programme. Our findings evidence a very positive impact on secondary teachers' capacity to self-organize and achieve agency in relation to curriculum making by adapting their knowledge and skills, learnt through the mobility, to their own culture and context through collaborative communities of practice.

KEYWORDS

curriculum agency, teachers' curriculum agency, teachers' international mobility

INTRODUCTION

Across the world, countries have engaged in different iterations of curriculum change (Gouëdard et al., 2020) and one of the common denominators is the proposal of more agency for teachers around curriculum making. Instead of being deliverers of curriculum (Priestley & Xenofontos, 2021), teachers are being asked to make professional judgements on how to translate, mediate and enact curriculum policy and frameworks in their classrooms (Deng, 2016). It has brought turbulence into their lives as they try to understand and

respond to this complex change of new curriculum structures, purposes and pedagogy. This opportunity to make curriculum more flexible has been unequally appropriated by teachers and schools. Part of this inequality can be explained by the difficulty felt by many teachers in assuming their agency in terms of curriculum decisions. Pantić (2015) observed that to work through this turmoil, teachers need to understand the purposes and content of such agency in relation to what these reforms are asking of them.

This paper explores the experiences of teachers in two countries, Portugal and Ireland, in relation to how their international mobility experiences through Erasmus+ have encouraged curricular agency. Erasmus+ has moved away from the sole focus on student learning abroad and now invites teachers to engage in expanding their pedagogical knowledge, skills and understanding. Whilst much has been written on student experiences of Erasmus (Courtois, 2014; Teichler, 1996), little has been mapped about the emergent agency experienced by secondary teachers. The majority of published texts focus on teachers and students at university levels.

The main purpose of the paper is to contribute to the discussion about the effects that these mobilities have had on the power of curricular agency of teachers from two European countries. It will define the theoretical framework that will act as a lens for the study and present a short outline of the curriculum context of both Portugal and Ireland. An outline of the Erasmus+ international experience of teachers will be proffered, followed by the methodological design. Our findings will be described and a discussion of how these findings contribute to the importance of generating teacher agency as curriculum makers will complete this paper.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Defining agency

This research works from a pragmatist approach (Dewey, 2016) and draws on the work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998) to define agency. They conceptualize human agency as “the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situation” (p. 970). This definition highlights what they call “The Chordal Triad of Agency”: the *iterative* which refers to the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action; the *projective* which encompasses the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action and the *practical-evaluative* elements which entails the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgements amongst alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations (pp. 970–971). Agency is the interplay of these three elements in a flow of time and is an emergent phenomenon rather than a sequentiality of disparate acts or stages of one act (p. 972).

Agency is not something a person has but something a person does, usually in relation with others (Priestley et al., 2015). Agency is about dynamic action and engagement. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) highlight the importance of intersubjectivity, social interaction and communication as critical components of the agentic processes. Biesta and Tedder (2007) expand this understanding by maintaining that actors act *by* means of their environment rather than simply *in* their environment. They conceive agency as something that “is achieved, rather than possessed, through the active engagement of individuals with aspects of their contexts-for action” (p. 132). Agency is thus achieved from the interplay of “individual

efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137).

Teacher agency

Priestley et al. (2015) further develop the concept of agency by focussing on the specific agency of the teacher (Figure 1). They highlight the “ecologies” within which teachers work, such as the cultures, structures and relationships and suggest that agency is to be understood as resulting from the interplay of individual's capacities and environment conditions. The following diagram adapted by Priestley et al. (2013) from Emirbayer and Mische (1998), offers the key dimensions of the teacher agency model. In a review of the literature on teacher agency, Cong-Lem (2021) asserted that the ecological framework was the most dominantly used by authors. The use of this model as a frame to explore teacher curriculum agency through the ERASMUS+ programme assists us in deciphering the complexity of the interplay of agency, teacher and curriculum making.

In the iterational section, Priestley et al. (2015) highlight both the life histories and the professional histories of teachers. Teachers' experience of their own personal history in the past and their accumulated history as a teacher proffer a range of routines, dispositions, preconceptions, competences, schemas, patterns, typification's and traditions. A teacher may draw on a broad repertoire of responses in an iterational movement through selecting the element of response that might be required, weighing up the similarities and categorizing where, when and whom this occurred with, in the past. The projective element has both short- and long-term aspirations in relation to a teacher's work and future possibilities of action. Priestley et al. (2015) state that whatever the motivation for these aspirations, they “are invariably rooted in teachers' prior experiences” (p. 32). Teacher agency thus is shaped by previous policy and curriculum making over the decades of a teacher's career.

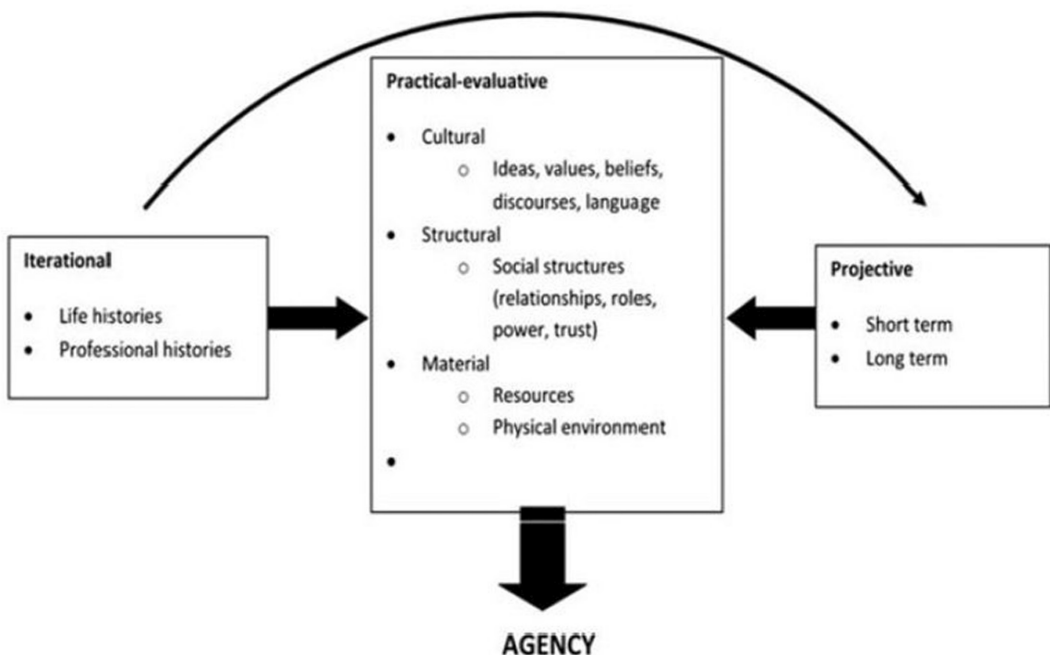


FIGURE 1 Teacher agency model (Priestley et al., 2013).

The practical-evaluative dimension is about the day-to-day working environment of the teacher and includes the culture, structure, and material resources. It looks at what is practically feasible in this concrete situation, and Priestley et al. (2015) note that this is a highly complex, ambiguous, and compromising space as this dimension can open up and close down possibilities for agency. Teachers' aspirations may not align with policy vision or enactment, it may not support pupil's own aspirations. In relation to our research, this framework allows us to break down the elements of teacher agency and ask what were the cultural, structural and material resources available to those teachers who engaged in the ERASMUS+ mobility projects. Did ERASMUS+ mobilities offer concrete contexts for action and what was the interplay between the different dimensions in achieving or inhibiting agency?

Curricular agency

Within a teacher's working environment, the teacher is a curriculum maker. Alvunger (2021) defines curriculum making as "a process in which the interplay between students, teachers, teaching materials and the contextual setting in the classroom shape and construct meanings among the participating individuals" (p. 607). For this study, we understand teachers' curriculum agency as the teacher's capacity to recontextualize policies and translate them into their field of action. This is a highly dynamic and non-linear social process of interpretation, mediation, negotiation and translation (Priestley et al., 2021). It is a question of exerting a double effort of interpreting the purposes that the policies have defined and of taking local action, which reconfigures and encourages student learning. Teacher agency as a curriculum maker does not just emerge by developing capacity through career professional development (CPD) but arises through the interplay of the three dimensions of agency. For many teachers, they have had difficulty in assuming their agency in terms of curricular decisions (Mouraz & Cosme, 2021). The mapping of the development of teachers' agency through the ERASMUS+ mobilities may offer some important insights into whether these connections with other countries and teachers contributed to raising the awareness of teachers who might act otherwise.

CURRICULUM CONTEXT IN IRELAND AND PORTUGAL

The Irish context

The Irish Education system is made up of three main levels: primary, secondary, and higher (Third level). Primary education is preceded by the provision of two years of universal pre-school education (NCCA, 2009). Most children begin primary school at 5 years of age. Secondary education in Ireland consists of a three-year Junior Cycle (lower secondary), followed by a two or three-year Senior Cycle (upper secondary), depending on whether the optional Transition Year (TY) is taken. Lower secondary education begins at the age of 12 years and senior cycle from 15/16.

New curriculum frameworks (NCCA, 2012, 2015, 2023) were introduced for primary and lower secondary education which proposed an epistemological and ontological shift in understanding the role and agency of the student and teacher. The rationale for these new curricula highlights the holistic growth of the student, underpinned by democratic values of equity, inclusion, and freedom. A focus on student learning dominates the policies. The senior cycle is currently under review (NCCA, 2019) as its dominant purposes are about preparing students for the Leaving Certificate examination that feeds into a points system for matriculation to university (Baird et al., 2015).

The Portuguese context

The compulsory Portuguese Education system is made up of two main levels: basic and secondary. As in the case of Ireland, basic education is preceded by the provision of a year of universal preschool education framed by Early Childhood Curriculum Guidelines (Ministry of Education, 2016). Generally, children begin primary school at 6 years of age. Basic education consists of a four-year elementary Cycle (from six to 10 years old). There is a two-year cycle (from 10 to 11 years old) where curriculum is composed of seven subjects. The third cycle of basic education has three years, nine subjects in each year to study, and finishes when pupils are 14/15 years old. An external evaluation on Math's and Portuguese language closes basic education.

Secondary begins by the age of 15/16 and lasts three years. It could be general or vocational and it is compulsory until student's complete 12th grade or are 18 years old. Since 2018, basic and secondary education has a pedagogical approach that is a competence-based curriculum, supported by the Student Profile by the end of Compulsory Schooling (Ministry of Education, 2017). This means that schools and teachers should organize curriculum according to students' interests and capacities in a close articulation with subjects (Ministry of Education, 2018). Secondary education finishes with a compulsory assessment that certifies the accomplishment of scholarship (Leaving Certificate) and is used as a selection device to assess Higher Education. Vocational offers are excluded from such external evaluation unless students want to enrol themselves in Higher Education.

TEACHERS' INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

The ERASMUS+ programme included in its educational aims the enhancing of international mobility experiences to enrich teaching professional development, teaching quality improvement and teaching effectiveness (European Commission, 2021). Through a "Mobility" project, a school can increase the quality of teaching and learning by sending its pupils or staff to another country to train, learn, go on a teaching assignment, or job-shadow. This is usually justified by the importance of an awareness of different educational systems, of exchange with colleagues from other countries, different pedagogical, assessment and evaluation systems, different curriculum frameworks, as well as work conditions offered by different countries. Teachers answering TALIS (The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey, 2018) refer to three main reasons for their decisions to engage in mobilities: to accompany students; to better learn languages and to strengthen their training as teachers (European Commission, 2021).

In a search of recent literature (since 2014), we found few studies focused on teachers at early levels (schools and high schools), compared with studies focusing on the higher education sector (Liu & Willis, 2021). From the literature found, three foci congregate research efforts related to the impact on teachers' career and offer challenges to schools or training institutions. Several papers reported research conducted on teachers' skills and knowledge, particularly concerning teaching EU topics or language improvement (European Commission, 2021; Novak et al., 2020). Such studies conclude that international mobilities have positive effects on teachers' skills and knowledge related to topics such as European citizenship. Another focus of research highlights the effects of international mobilities on curricular and pedagogical practices and the opportunities to transfer curricular and pedagogical learning insights into their own teaching practice and classrooms (Okken & Coelen, 2021).

The third focus of the literature review emerged from a transnational teachers' identity development that highlighted the important journey of learning in teacher identity and the requirement of critical thinking and intellectual agency through engagement in different

international settings (Gao, 2021). Other research conducted with preservice teachers put in practice an idea to develop teachers as entrepreneurs: “being creative, team players, open-minded, innovative, passionate, motivated, hard-working and risk-takers; being able to overcome challenges; having initiative; being proactive, organized and persevering; having leadership skills, communication skills, the ability to adapt; having a positive attitude and being decision-makers. Short-term placements contribute to personal development, improved foreign language competence, increased awareness and understanding of other cultures, and acquiring entrepreneurship competence” (Arruti & Panos, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This work is based on an empirical investigation of a qualitative nature, carried out in 2022 academic year, which collected and analysed the testimonies of headmasters and teachers, from Ireland and Portugal. The approach highlights the importance of conducting research in real contexts in order to make sense of the effects and impact of teachers' international mobilities phenomenon. This paper presents the voices of a set of teachers and headmasters narrating their personal experiences of international professional mobilities.

In both countries, teachers participated in international exchange projects. The headmasters supported these journeys. Such international experience was the main reason of the invitation to be part of this study. Schools are different concerning the rural versus urban character but all of them had been involved in international exchange programmes, like ERASMUS+. In Ireland, the study collected information from two headmasters and eight teachers, organized in three individual interviews and two focus groups. In Portugal, five individual interviews were carried out with three teachers and two headmasters. Ethical issues were respected, regarding informed consent and data protection. The following [Table 1](#) outlines the biographical and geographical details collected from all respondents.

[Table 2](#) highlights a range of years of experience in teaching in a particular school (from 25 years in a school to 1 year) and the amount of mobilities or years teaching abroad (from

TABLE 1 Teacher biographical, geographical and mobility focus.

	Portugal	Ireland
Participants	5 × teachers 2 × Headmasters	6 × teachers 2 × headmasters 1 × deputy principal
Location	Urban secondary school Rural school Small urban secondary school	Rural mixed school 2 × Urban all-girls secondary schools
International mobilities	60+ experiences of working abroad	12+ experiences of working abroad
Subjects	Languages Biology Chemistry Geography Tourism	Languages Mathematics Technology Electronics History Geography Guidance Physical Education
Years in the school	17–25 years	1–20 years

TABLE 2 The mobility foci and country visited.

	Portugal	Ireland
Focus on the mobility	Climate issues Student mobility Racism and xenophobia prevention Curriculum evaluation and leadership Tourism UNESCO Classified monuments and sites of regions Intercultural issues Citizenship Pedagogy	Retention of students Learning or improvement of Language Technology Mentoring Subject pedagogy Accelerated Learning Needs International Studies
Countries visited	Azores, Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Germany, Spain, Italy, UK, Turkey, Ireland, Germany, Belgium, Greece, Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia, Turkey, Latvia & Romania	France, Malta, Italy, Tenerife, Spain Japan, Qatar, Vietnam, Australia, Abu Dhabi

25 to their first mobility). It also captures a mix of urban and rural schools, with a wide range of subject interests.

The mobility foci also demonstrate a plethora of interests which include KA2 collaborative projects with students and teachers; KA1—job shadowing and teaching missions, with the addition of engaging in conferences abroad or working abroad for several years. Whilst Portuguese teachers were engaged in mainly European visits, the Irish teachers have experienced other international educational systems.

The interviews followed a script that aimed to characterize the mobility experiences lived by the interviewees according to the operational objectives. The guidelines for interviews included questions distributed in four main dimensions as follows: (1) Personal experience of mobilities' description; (2) Information regarding the effects perceived by teachers of such experiences in their continual professional development; (3) Information regarding their curriculum perspectives and pedagogical actions; and (4) Information concerning the impact on the school's culture and climate.

A content analysis was done on material from the transcriptions of interviews using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Both a priori and emergent categories were used in coding, the first ones modelled by questions and the emergent ones referring subcategories. The coding process was shared between researchers and emerging themes discussed. The individual themes from each country were outlined and the overlapping themes were then described.

FINDINGS

This study was designed to investigate the experiences of teachers in two countries, Portugal and Ireland, in relation to how their international mobility experiences have encouraged curricular agency and impacted on curriculum making in both the school and classroom. Based on data from the different interviews, four main themes emerged in the findings, demonstrating the overlapping similarities and different focuses in both countries:

- a. The purposes of international mobilities
- b. The importance of continual professional development and collaboration
- c. Teacher's agency and curriculum making
- d. The effects, impacts, and challenges of international mobilities

The purposes of international mobilities

The common characteristics between the two countries lay in a common approach to the ecology of culture: the beliefs, values, and ideas they all shared about education. The reason why they undertook these **mobilities lay in a deep desire to advance academic, pedagogic, and technological development in the light of recent curriculum change**. Participants engaged in themes that moved beyond their subject disciplines and the mobility uprooted the myth of content knowledge alone. They involved themselves in environmental issues, discrimination, bullying awareness, transversal themes and suggested cross-curricular courses on photography and technology. Learning was connected to “creativity, problem solving and digital empowerment” (participant Portuguese PP1).

I had an award-winning project, called pedagogical photography, and it was more focused on the use of photography, but with a pedagogical inclination that involved various school subjects and the use of photography to approach the contents of different disciplines. (Participant Irish 2 (PI2))

The headmaster of a rural school saw that Erasmus+ assisted in disrupting staff's insular, small village culture and helped to broaden their minds. He outlined the danger of “group think” and trying to move his staff to a “more open and broad way of thinking” (PP1). This idea was also subscribed by other headmaster from a small rural school from Ireland He posited that “it's a great value to people that you have this little bit of an adventure where you go off somewhere else and you experience a different country, different people and solutions to how we can help our students” (PI1). Participants proposed that the mobilities offered “a new vigour and new enthusiasm” (PI2) in approaching pedagogy and created a space where they were able to “think outside the box” (PI8) about their approach to teaching and learning.

There was an **awareness within data that with the influence of globalization and international policies dictating the trajectory of education in the world**, mobilities offered the opportunity for professional conversations to take place and to “develop intercultural competence through the knowledge of another's language, cultural habits, citizenship and human rights” (PP4).

I think that we are more aware of what they [the students] need to learn in the future... we come back with a different spirit of openness and even relativization of what is truly important in the preparation of students, facing the new challenges of society.

(PI1)

Whilst many teachers spoke about their individual interests in learning linguistics and broadening understanding of the differences and similarities between jurisdictions, **the main foci in both countries were on changing structures and building a more student-centred pedagogy (PP4)**. Also, mobilities proposed **new insights on pedagogy**. The following narrative from an Irish history teacher depicts the impact on his own pedagogy and this new learning was evident throughout data.

When we observed in France, the way they taught history is to look at source material in history, documents, images from the events, a lot about understanding about sources, identifying history in terms such as bias, exaggeration, propaganda, you know, all of it through resources and the content is downplayed....There was a lot of student input as opposed to the teacher doing a lot of the talking.....

(PI5)

Participants in both countries confirmed the importance of expanding their material resources and learning about technological resources (PP2) which were highly useful during the pivot to online teaching during the pandemic:

When COVID hit, we had already tried, we were already a lot more skills with ICT. And we were able to implement online learning straight away, whereas other schools were like, ah, what do we do? How do we do it?

(P13)

Teachers from both countries highlighted the **importance of improving digital skills** and keeping connected to new technology (PP1). Different projects such as “Apps for All” and “Absolute” were referred to by teachers as major resources they worked on over three years which “were very student focused” and “are now linked to the goals for sustainable development” (P11). Participants were clear that the digital skills they engaged with were brought back to their schools and I think that has definitely filtered down to a really good degree in the school in that we now have two computer rooms with working computers (P13).

One of the major purposes of the mobility was **the social engagement** not only between teachers and other teachers but also between teachers and students and students and students. Each country outlined that curiosity, love of learning and the growing uncertainty and unpredictability of our world motivated them to seek out others (PP3) of a similar mindset and try to find solutions:

I think knowing that you're not an island, so you're not on your own, that curriculum involves more than just you. So, it's all about discussion and collaboration and being open to talking to people and gathering groups...Encouraging them to have their voice heard, for their opinion to be given.

(P18)

The importance of continual professional development

Data evidenced the importance of openness to and engagement with continual and lifelong learning and new ideas for a teacher in their career and suggested that they previously “had gone stale” (P12).

That openness to build a vision of openness to share and collaborate with others. And I think that that openness leads to the travel, the research, the continuous professional development and, you know, it kind of goes hand in hand.

(P16)

Participants outlined that **mobilities disrupted previous thinking** about how the classroom operates and offered new insights and different solutions to problems that were similar in both jurisdictions. This was a source of surprise and presented “a massive learning curve” (P18), that influenced their short- and long-term projective imaginaries. Elements of this learning encouraged a reimagining of curriculum making (PP3) such as how to design a module; how to restructure a lesson; one-hour lessons without textbooks; new methodologies; student input v's teacher input; resources and the many skills and competencies for the classroom. The main element that was evidenced by both countries was that mobilities offered a discovery and freshness of approach and application to practice.

Participants were able to see what would work for them but also the limitations of certain ideas due to their context and time given to implement them.

So, you know, I think the great thing about international education is exposure and learning and being open to learning and then taking back elements that really work well for you or that you think would work well within the system here. (P17)

They wished to replicate experiences and apply methodologies, in the classroom, that they saw carried out on their mobility. One teacher in Portugal noted the juxtaposition of the “traditionalist and less traditionalist systems” but also that each participant knew how to extract the potential of their own system (PP1). The mobility had given them the skills and language to adapt and critique both their own and other approaches.

Both jurisdictions highlighted the importance of the structural ecology of agency with **the increase in collaborative work** from the mobility, not just with those who had gone abroad as a group but with other teachers and leaders in the schools. Teachers built networks of professional practice with new colleagues from new countries (PP4), and they collaborated not only on pedagogical issues but engaged in discussions on sociocultural, political, and professional elements of their life as teachers. One of the big challenges they faced was to ensure dissemination in their schools of what had been learnt.

We are not changing the school because of mobilities, but mobilities help to change the school, because ... we can go and review some ideas and that's it, take advantage of some.... see is that within what is possible.

(P13)

What both countries data evidenced was that whatever learning was accomplished on the mobility, it was not about just the individual gaining from that development but rather it projected itself into each school as different collaborations and professional conversations took place on the return journey. Participants could see how what they had learnt could open possibilities for themselves and for their colleagues, also. However, in the following comment from one teacher, they were very aware that any change needed to be underpinned by passion.

We'll give them [other colleagues] ideas and see where they can run. But I think with things like that, you have to be passionate and interested in it. And if you're not, it goes nowhere.

(P14)

Teachers' agency and curriculum making

The agency of a teacher began with the teacher's own ability to lift their head beyond their own school environment and see the bigger opportunities in the world for education. Many participants spoke about the mobility as taking a chance “to move outside of our own system” (P11), “the joy of discovery” (P12) and “recognising the need to change and break the cycle of doing the same things” (PP9). Portuguese teachers highlighted the importance of intrinsic motivation and “a spirit of curiosity in wanting to know different things” (PP2). Irish teachers saw that this personal agency was empowered by the people around them. These colleagues had similar motivation who put “students at the core of everything we do, and we take ego out of the room” (P18). It was further enhanced by the collaborative practices and openness of colleagues to try new things:

I did a lot of team teaching and a lot of observation of teaching when I was in Japan and I probably brought back, you know, less of a fear (...) I think my

experience of working with different people have probably made me feel very OK with that. And making mistakes...learning from it, but also not being stuck doing the same thing.

(PI8)

Collaboration also depended on **the support and engagement with senior management** and the structures they put into place were noted as essential for any type of teacher agency. The senior management in the study championed a shared vision for the school and encouraged a levelling out of power structures, giving voice to all in the processes of curriculum making. What was evident was the importance of a functioning distributive leadership system which empowered the teachers to take initiative. Senior management saw mobility as offering a richness of knowledge and skills which augmented the type of culture they wished to promote.

So, we're very conscious that it's kind of a pebble in the water. A little change here with the right kind of culture can actually have a major, major impact.

(PP2)

Agency also arises for teachers when new curricula are offered and particularly "when the curriculum paradigm shifts" (PP1) which in both countries has encouraged greater teachers' "autonomy and flexibility" (PP1). These new curricula often open different spaces for a teacher to achieve agency through creativity and innovation. Irish teachers spoke particularly about Transition Year (a year between lower and upper secondary) which offered "a kind of a new vigour or a new enthusiasm because it is a place where you want to try new things and see where else can we go and what we can bring in?" (PI7).

The Erasmus+ mobilities **emphasize the complexity of making curriculum** and they act as a process of sense making for teachers and students. Sense making by participants took the form of new knowledge and new pedagogy through job shadowing, team teaching, observations and partaking in different courses. The common themes running through all data were the social process of curriculum making and the capacity to extract the potential of new learning to their own system and culture.

By going outside of our own education system, we can witness something happening in another European country that we might be able to, using our flexibility, apply here as well to improve the excellence of education.

(PI6)

One participant suggested that **there is space to a deepening form of curricular contextualization**. In one Irish school, the teachers built a programme in which both history and Geography were taught through French (Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)). The catalyst for this change to CLIL was during the observation of a geography lesson in Paris "and they did like a role play debate in English about how the roles you could take as city planner and the people who were protesting this and then the city planners themselves and the architects. And these are all 17-year-olds taking on these roles and having this conversation about a fictitious town in another language. It was amazing" (PI5). The realization of the progression of students in other countries interrupted previous expectations of what students could achieve and these new expectations were brought back to schools where curriculum was looked at in a new light (PP3).

Curriculum making for these participants went beyond their own classrooms **and influenced their subject departments and the school** itself. They were engaging with other sites of curriculum making at the meso level and were actively trying to make sense of national and

international policies. They had built networks around Europe, and they felt rejuvenated by this in their work practices. They felt empowered to bring about change.

The effects, impacts and challenges of international mobilities

The impact for both countries lies in a more student-centred approach to education leading to the involvement of students not only in the classroom but in the international projects. As well as increased student satisfaction with pedagogical work and the building of school environments that were more relaxed and fun, students were also being encouraged to see the world outside their own habitat.

The students that we have, a lot of them have never been outside of our town much.... they have a very insulated viewpoint. Erasmus's experience gives the students a kind of a broader view of the whole, but also there's a whole big world for them.

(P1)

Data highlighted the importance of European citizenship for students and building the awareness of belonging to a wider network of countries. Participants noted the increased student autonomy and communication skills with their growing awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity and its importance for future personal and professional pathways.

For teachers, engagement created a more democratic approach to education and there was a clear focus on a "ground-up" process of dialogue, discussion and decision-making about curriculum in participating schools. Participants spoke about "the importance of pushing each other" (PP4); "opening up my classroom" (PP3); "great adhesion amongst disciplines"; "the spirit of availability" and "the ability of undoing normativity through the socialization of other colleagues in other countries." The key to the development of agency in curriculum making was seen through the process of collaboration. Portuguese teachers spoke about the "halo effect" (PP1) in which the positivity of the group expanded to other teachers who also wished to join. Irish teachers who had engaged in international teaching outlined the joy in the process of curriculum making together and how it focuses on the individual needs of their students.

The challenges to this agency are of course ensuring participants receive the time for professional discussions and collaboration. This depends very much on the support of management "not seeing it as a waste of time" and timetabling. The challenges highlighted the interplay of the cultural, structural and material ecologies. Teachers spoke about the iterative element of agency in the narrative about their own personal lives and family commitments but also the stress of taking time off during term time and the concern about their workload and students' progression. The other challenges offered were the fear factor in going to another country and engaging in a new language. Student exchanges were seen as challenging due to the paperwork from the exchange school's point of view. Getting approval for the projects at times took too long and the restrictions of perhaps only one teacher at a time attending courses. Overall, the pandemic has put many of the mobilities on hold and schools are only beginning to emerge from this period of uncertainty.

DISCUSSION

The main purpose of this research was to contribute to the discussion about the impact and effects that mobilities have had on the power of curricular agency of teachers from two European countries. In the framework on agency proffered by Priestley et al. (2015, p.

22), they clearly state that “agency is seen as emerging from the *interaction* of individual ‘capacity’ with environing ‘conditions.’” They see agency working simultaneously through the interplay of the capacity of actors and their actions within the context and culture, structures and materials of the school. Thus, their ecological view sees agency “as an emergent phenomenon.” According to Bar-Yam (2002), emergence refers to the existence of collective behaviours, what parts of a system do together that they would not do alone. In other words, the global behaviour of the system (i.e., the emergent) is a result of the interactions between the individual entities of the system (De Wolf & Holvoet, 2004).

Our contributing arguments lie in acknowledging the importance of the interplay of these ecologies for teacher agency in the process of curriculum making in both countries. Erasmus+ offers a space for the individual entities of an educational system to interrelate and interact and do things together that they might not have done as individuals. We draw specific attention to the following two insights:

1. Erasmus+ acts as a catalyst to the agentic process of self-organization
2. Erasmus + acts as a catalyst to building collaborative professional communities both at home and abroad.

Erasmus+ acts as a catalyst to the agentic process of self-organization

It is significant that Priestley et al. (2015) are turning to the “new science” (Wheatley, 2006) to situate teacher agency. In explaining what this means, Wheatley (2006) writes that life is a vast web of interconnections where cooperation and participation are required and where relationships are what matters. The findings of this study nest very comfortably within the concept of emergence and the new science. They recognize the importance of that interplay between the individual's capacity and the impact of environing conditions both at home for the teachers and abroad. However, from our findings we suggest that an element of building towards this emergent phenomenon of agency is the engagement of teachers in a process of self-organization. A critical mass of agency cannot emerge without some element of self-organization. We argue that mobilities are a distinct catalyst to facilitate this self-organization in schools and assist with the emergence of teacher agency in their curriculum making.

Self-organization is a dynamical and adaptive process where systems acquire and maintain structure themselves, without external control (De Wolf & Holvoet, 2004). Teachers who engage in self-organization think about connections, not parts, segments and dichotomies and view the school as a web or eco-system. Mobilities connect with different knowledge and skills inputs, but these do not control changes made in the school. Rather our findings demonstrated the importance of each school team deconstructing their new learning to adapt to their own culture and context to bring the emergence of something new. Morrison (2008, p. 20) states that in the process of a system evolving itself from within, it is the local circumstances that dictate the nature of the emerging self-organization. The local circumstances in both Portugal and Ireland had highly motivated teachers and supportive leaders who championed a distributive leadership style (Spillane et al., 2001). The pattern of distribution was located in a shared holistic vision for the school and a democratic process of hearing the voices of all and acting on what was heard. It was also located in the material resources of time and spaces for dialogue.

Data demonstrated the desire of these teachers to make connections with others to make sense of the changes they were facing in their classrooms and schools. New knowledge and skills helped them to bring order and dynamism to disorder and stability. Fryer and Ruis (2004), explain that this is an attempt to create rules so that the system can begin to

find its best fit, self-organize and adapt to new possibilities. Best fit was found through the positive feedback from their colleagues who connected with their re-imaginings, and this reinforced the new idea or skill. Their dissemination often locked in the new way of curriculum making and this then gathered momentum in the school. Like a snowball, it moved and gathered more and more elements, enlarging its scope and gathering additional aggregate as it moved. The headmaster in an Irish school equated this to throwing a pebble into a pond and the rippling effect of the mobility on the vision and mission of the school. The emerging phenomenon of teacher agency had been constructed from within the school, from ground up.

Erasmus+ acts as a catalyst to building collaborative professional communities

Findings highlighted that through the Erasmus+ process, secondary teachers positively engaged in collaborative learning communities abroad. Their learning included an encounter with the diversity of cultures, values, behaviour, knowledge, skills and people from other jurisdictions. As individuals, they were highly motivated to expand their learning. On return to their schools, they reached out to their colleagues and began to create new collaborative learning communities. Fenwick (2012, p. 142) stresses the complexity for teachers “in learning both *in* collaboration, developing new co-productive approaches to practice, and *for* collaboration, developing capacities for engaging with diverse and even conflicting professional traditions.” The function of teachers on return from abroad was to instigate a response to the new curricula changes and navigate how these impacted their day-to-day working environment. Teachers were no longer operating as individuals in curriculum making but as collectives in creating new pedagogical spaces. This meant more than just getting along but laying down rules for engagement, spaces were “ego was left at the door” and a willingness to listen. They were developing a shared vision for their school's future.

The one common element that assisted this ground-up emergence was that each teacher, without exception, narrated their capacity to be curious and motivated to look beyond their immediate horizon and to engage with the wider world. There was an understanding that they must evolve, adapt, change and avoid inertia. One of the findings of this study was the capacity of the actor to act as part of the initial instigation of the process of engagement. The disposition to “opening up” was used continually throughout the interviews and took the form of being open to the culture and climate of the school; open to new knowledge brought into the school by new teachers; opening up the classroom to other teachers and visitors; opening up spaces for professional conversations and opening up their perceptions of what is possible for their students. The first premise of self-organization, leading to the emergent phenomenon of teacher agency, is a consciousness of the dynamic power of the system of education as an open system and the fight against seeing it as a closed “impressive fortress” (Wheatley, 2006). Relationships and collaboration were key to making sense of the pedagogical changes confronting each school.

Through navigating the complexity of the practical-evaluative element of agency, teachers showed their understanding of the many non-linear aspects of their day-to-day existence in the classroom. They noted that the evolution of curriculum making in the school was fostered by a series of “jumps” which signify new levels of order in the school. Prigogine and Stengers (1984) see that at certain bifurcation points where possible trajectories are chosen by a system (school), it is at these jumps that the system self-organizes, and new behaviour begins to emerge. Examples in data were seen in the application of new technological and methodological processes to achieve a student-centred approach to learning. In many of the interviews, the projective aspirations for the continued development of curriculum making

in the short and long term were evidenced in the desire for the creation of further spaces of curriculum innovation and reform.

In 1875, Lewes noted that emergence is a dynamical construct emerging over time but in the form that does not display how it occurred. There are many elements and components which impact and effect the emerging phenomena of teacher agency. However, from this study, it is clear that Erasmus+ mobilities act as one of the catalysts to the understanding and enactment of curriculum change in schools in both Portugal and Ireland. They have had a very positive impact on teacher agency in relation to curriculum making through the process of self-organization. This has had further impact on the positive experience of the students who are also been asked to expand their thinking and learning and become citizens of Europe. Whilst data highlighted the challenges of time, timetabling, teacher availability and the need of enviroining conditions that are open to new learning, the growth of robust collaborative practices amongst those who attended the mobility and further on the integration of the rest of the school into that practice, attest the empowerment of professional development through engagement with diverse countries, cultures, and educational communities.

CONCLUSION

This study argues that Erasmus+ international mobilities act as a catalyst for building teacher's agency through the processes of self-organization and collaborative professional communities. These processes assist teachers in making sense of new curricular change and leading innovation and judgements on curriculum making in the school. Engaging in new knowledge and skills disrupted previous ideas and practices and offered a growing self-efficacy in new pedagogy and technology. Contact with other education systems has contributed to raising the awareness of teachers who may act otherwise. The impact of the mobilities had a positive effect on what teachers and students now do together rather than as individuals. The interplay of the different ecologies of the individual, culture and context, structures and materials in which they work, all assisted in initiating a process of self-organization leading to the emergence of agency in curriculum making. Data evidenced the emergence of something new in the schools that was wholly unexpected. We can conclude that participation in Erasmus+ stimulates a competency in agency and generates the emergence of collaborative educational communities who take responsibility for curriculum making and development.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

As explained in the article, all the ethical requirements were accomplished: Informed consent, data protection, and anonymity of participants were respected. In the paper, authors

reproduce a framework from Professor Mark Priestley, who agreed with the inclusion of figure.

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